

Message Text

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SUBJECT: EC COUNCIL ADOPTS "ACTION PROGRAM" FOR ON-JOB
SAFETY AND HEALTH

REFS: (A) BRUSSELS 12926; (B) ECA-22; (C) BRUSSELS 1265

1. SUMMARY. THE EC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS HAS GIVEN THE GREEN LIGHT TO LAUNCHING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH. THE EC LABOR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL IN LUXEMBOURG JUNE 29 APPROVED A THREE-YEAR "ACTION PROGRAM OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES ON SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK", AND AS THE FIRST STEP ADOPTED A DIRECTIVE TO PROTECT THE HEALTH OF WORKERS EXPOSED TO VINYL CHLORIDE MONOMER. END. SUMMARY.

2. THOSE COUNCIL DECISIONS AT LUXEMBOURG WERE OVERSHADOWED BY A DISPUTE AT THE SAME MEETING OVER WHETHER THE EC SOCIAL FUND SHOULD BE USED TO FINANCE THE CREATION OF PUBLIC SECTOR JOBS FOR UNEMPLOYED YOUTH (REF A). THE DUTCH LABOR ATTACHE, IN A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH MISSION OFFICER JULY 11, LAMENTED THE MEAGER PRESS ATTENTION THE COUNCIL DECISIONS ON
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OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH HAS RECEIVED. IN HIS VIEW, THE NEW PROGRAM IS A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH FOR THE COMMUNITY IN THE SOCIAL FIELD, AND WILL BRING TANGIBLE BENEFITS TO COMMUNITY WORKERS EXPOSED TO VARIOUS ON-THE-JOB HAZARDS.

3. THE EC COMMISSION IN DECEMBER 1977 SENT THE COUNCIL

AN 8,000-WORD RESOLUTION PROPOSING NEARLY 30 "PRIORITY" ACTIVITIES TO PROTECT THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF WORKERS (REF B). MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL AFFAIRS WORKING GROUP OF THE EC COUNCIL'S COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES (COREPER) QUICKLY AGREED THAT THE COMMISSION PROPOSAL WAS TOO AMBITIOUS FOR THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THE COMMUNITY AND MEMBER STATES.

4. AS A RESULT, THE IMPRESSION GREW THAT THE COUNCIL WOULD SUBSTANTIALLY WEAKEN THE COMMISSION'S PROPOSAL. ("COUNCIL TO BACK-TRACK ON SAFETY PROGRAM", A BRITISH JOURNAL HEADLINED.) HOWEVER, IN THE JUDGMENT OF COUNCIL AND COMMISSION SOURCES, THE KEY ITEMS WERE RETAINED IN THE JUNE 29 COUNCIL RESOLUTION. THE COUNCIL AGREED THAT THE COMMUNITY'S PRIORITIES SHOULD BE:

- SETTING UNIFORM LIMITS FOR EXPOSURE TO TOXIC SUBSTANCES.
- EXCHANGING INFORMATION AND SPONSORING RESEARCH ON AETIOLOGY OF WORK-RELATED ACCIDENTS AND DISEASES.
- ESTABLISHING LIMITS FOR NOISE AND VIBRATION AT THE WORK PLACE.
- STUDYING SYSTEMS FOR MONITORING AND INSPECTING UNCLASSIFIED

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- WORK SITES WITH HEALTH AND SAFETY PROBLEMS, AND
- PROMOTING THE USE OF RECOMMENDED METHODOLOGIES.

5. A MAJOR OMISSION FROM THE APPROVED PRIORITIES WAS AN "INITIATIVE" FOR THE "INCORPORATION OF SAFETY ASPECTS INTO VARIOUS STAGES OF DESIGN, PRODUCTION, AND OPERATION." THIS COMMISSION PROPOSAL, WHICH COVERS STUDIES ON SAFETY FACTORS IN BUILDING PLANTS, ORGANIZING WORK WITHIN PLANTS, AND DESIGNING MACHINERY, IS NOT DEAD, BUT CAN BE PURSUED BY THE COMMISSION AT A LATER DATE WE UNDERSTAND.

6. THE APPROVED COUNCIL RESOLUTION OUTLINES THE SCOPE OF THE COMMISSION'S WORK IN HEALTH AND SAFETY OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS, AND CONSTITUTES COMMISSION AUTHORITY TO CARRY OUT ALL POINTS WITHIN ITS COMPETENCE. SPECIFIC COUNCIL APPROVAL, HOWEVER, WILL BE NECESSARY WHEN AN EC DIRECTIVE IS INVOLVED, FOR EXAMPLE, TO SET EXPOSURE LIMITS FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES IN ALL MEMBER STATES.

7. A SIGN THAT THE RESOLUTION IS NOT MEANT AS MERELY

A PIOUS DECLARATION IS THAT THE COUNCIL ALSO ADOPTED ITS FIRST DIRECTIVE ESTABLISHING ON-THE-JOB HEALTH STANDARDS. IT SET AN EXPOSURE LIMIT OF 3 PPM (PARTS PER MILLION) PER ANNUM OF VINYL CHLORIDE MONOMER (ORIGINALLY THE COMMISSION HAD SUGGESTED A 5 PPM MAXIMUM DOSE, BUT CUT IT DOWN UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE EC ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE). A COUNCIL PRESS RELEASE CALLS THE NEW DIRECTIVE THE "FIRST STAGE IN A SPECIFIC COMMUNITY PROGRAM FOR THE PROTECTION OF WORKERS AGAINST EMISSIONS OF HARMFUL SUBSTANCES." HINTON

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